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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that service learning and learning communities can be key to student retention. Anderson (1998) argues that service learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. Service learning blends service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs. Gabelnick et al. (1990) define learning communities as purposeful restructuring of curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. Both service learning and learning communities are grounded in the work of John Dewey. This paper describes service learning in paired courses (Speech 100 and English 100) at Cerritos College in California. In conjunction with readings they were doing about innocent suffering, students chose an organization at which they would like to volunteer, and committed to 10 hours of group organizing and five hours of volunteer work at the organization. Group members wrote a paper and did a Power Point presentation on their project. The class had a low attrition rate, which the author theorizes may have been due to the cohesion developed within the class and the involvement in the surrounding community as a result of the project. (Contains 24 references.) (NB)

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Service Learning and Learning Communities
By: Kimberly Hubbert, Cerritos College Learning Communities Co-Coordinator

In a nation that prides itself on being among the worlds leader in fields ranging from science (e.g., AIDS research, mapping of the human genome) to technology (e.g., Microsoft, IBM) to sports (e.g., number of Olympic medals), the United States was shocked and chagrined to learn that its youths' academic records paled in comparison to other countries (Henry, 1998). To make matters worse, Californian's students ranked among the lowest in national student success surveys (Helfand, 1999; Libit, 1993). In response to the public's shock, anger, and concern, politicians and delegates have rallied to find methods to promote and facilitate student success, as defined by grade point average, retention, and citizenship. Specifically, within colleges there has been an insurgence of programs and theories designed to facilitate such success. Many of these theories and programs are rooted in retention literature (Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1983; Light, 1992). This is justified by the fact that at the high school and college levels the ultimate "failure" is not for students to score poorly on national exams but for students to leave school. When one delves into the student retention literature, the key element of preventing such a loss is helping students make connections. It is through connections to each other, faculty, the institution, subject matters and the community that students receive the motivation to not only stay in school but also improve their performance. According to Tinto (1987) the secret of retention is to develop effective educational communities that involve all students in their social and intellectual life. Tinto further argues that experiences, both academic and social, serve to integrate the individual into the life of the college, to heighten attachments and thus strengthen individual commitments to the goal of education and to the institution (1987). Finally, Tinto notes that successful retention programs integrate individuals into the mainstream of the social and intellectual life of the institution and into the communities of people that make up that life (1987). Likewise, Light (1992) found that interactive relationships organized around academic work are vital to a student's intellectual and cognitive growth and recommends that colleges create opportunities to help students work collegially. Additionally, Astin (1993) revealed two environmental factors most predictive of positive change: (a) interaction among students (b) interaction between faculty and students. Service learning and learning communities are two academically compatible programs that are designed to help students' work collegially, thus, developing the sort of relational and intellectual connections necessary to encourage success.

Not only are learning communities and service learning instrumental in helping students and faculty to make connections (see Gabelnick et al., 1990, chap. 6 & 7) but they also help students, faculty, and colleges realize their goals. This point is crystallized by Cross (1998) who acknowledges that almost every college has the same two goals in its mission statement: (1) training students effectively for the workplace and (2) educating them for good citizenship. These objectives are supported by governor Gray Davis' statewide service learning requirement proposal. His proposal is rooted in the assumption that service learning helps in the development of citizenship and career training. Davis argues that the ethics of the WWII generation's sense of obligation to the future and an appreciation for what they inherited has waned, and service learning is the vehicle to rekindle that sense of obligation (Lindlaw, 1999). Davis' rationale is supported by Guarasci's (2001) argument that students are learning the arts of democracy when they engage in community based learning (i.e., service learning).

Clearly, service learning and learning communities help students and faculty to make connections. These practices are best used in connection with each other. Cross (1998) posits that the ultimate learning community is service learning. In short, learning communities facilitate the disciplinary integration that is used in service learning to address real problems. In other words, service learning in the learning communities classroom helps students master content and skills and makes it possible to use the information effectively (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 15). For example, before serving at a homeless shelter, a student may first explore the social causes of homelessness (Sociology), the history of homelessness in the United States (History), and how change is possible (Business, Speech, Sociology). After exploring this issue from multiple fields and perspective, students would then engage in service learning (e.g., helping to open a new shelter, helping with programs that work to combat homelessness, or serving food at the shelter) and reflect on the experience in light of what had been discussed in their learning community courses. Thus, the intent of this article is to address the idea of using service learning in the learning communities classroom. Service learning in the learning communities classroom is best explored by examining a rationale and definition of both service learning and learning communities, an exploration of their theoretical foundations, and an examination of a sample service learning project from its inception to its execution and post experience reflection. Before service learning and learning communities can thoroughly be examined, a rationale and definition of each is needed.

Service Learning: A Rationale

To those who keep up with current events, the notion of service learning (a.k.a. volunteering, community service, charity work, etc.) is certainly not new. Not only is it a buzz word in the field of academia, it is also a phenomena discussed by those in private and, non-academic, public arenas. This is evident by the plethora of articles in the newspapers highlighting and lauding those who volunteer. Articles such as "Helping Out-Naturally," which reports on college students who chose to participate in their college's alternative spring-break program by spending their week volunteering at Catalina Island's conservancy (Aguilera, 2000); "They Lead The Way," which explains adolescents' participation in National Youth Service Day (Ryan, 2000); "Helping Hands," which recounts the story of a teen who began a community-service project for his bar mitzvah yet turned such an experience into a weekly commitment (Lubens, 1999), and finally "Volunteers Give Back: children from troubled homes help build house for needy family in Mexico" (Canto, 2000), which recounts the joy teens experience, even when they themselves are from broken homes, helping others. Along with such articles; however, are equal numbers of pleas for folks to give back to their community (e.g., *The Orange County Register's* Trouble Shooter column with its numerous requests: "Organizations in Need of Volunteers;" "How You Can Help;" "Many Charities in Need of Help," etc.). The trend in service learning is not only evident within the community but also within academia. The number of colleges and high schools implementing community service graduation requirements corroborates this. In 1998, 54 out of 1,000 California school districts required community service to graduate. This is not, however, unique to K-12 education. Monterey Bay State and many colleges in Maryland have voluntarily made their graduates fulfill such requirements (Sacchetti, 2001). Additionally, governor Gray Davis has proposed a requirement that would mandate all state college and university students complete community service hours. The reason for its popularity is best described by the service learning results (Sacchetti, 2001).

The service learning literature reveals that it works. Research indicates that through service learning students are better able to link personal and interpersonal development with academic and cognitive development. In addition to such linking, students are also learning how to be responsible citizens, which is accomplished by addressing social problems in the community by not only researching them but by taking social action to help remedy them (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Service Learning Defined

Those who have explored the service learning literature in search of a consistent service learning definition know that there are myriad definitions available. Eyler & Giles (1999) report that in 1990, Kendall had tallied 147 different service learning definitions; upon examining the post 1990 literature the number continues to grow. Although the definitions vary, most share the common features of learning and reflection, which distinguish service learning from volunteerism or charity work. Kendall clarifies this by arguing that service learning provides a linkage between community service and classroom instruction, using reflection to develop critical thinking skills and a sense of civic responsibility (1990). Anderson (1998) further clarifies the notion of service learning by describing it as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. Anderson explains that as a philosophy of education, service learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. As an instructional method, service learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs (1998). To further clarify service learning, Weigart (1998) provide three key elements that distinguish service learning from other forms of volunteerism: (a) service aligned with course objectives, (b) reflection occurs in light of course objectives (c) assignments are assessed in terms of the objectives set forth.

Learning Communities: A Rationale

In addition to an increasing interest in service learning, the field of academia has also embraced learning communities as a vehicle to promote student success. Colleges such as Evergreen State University in Washington, University of Oregon, University of Washington, New York City College, Shoreline Community College, and numerous others have adopted various learning communities models (Gabelnick et al., chap. 2). Both Instructors and students are singing learning communities praises. As reported by Chesebro, et al. (1999), instructors find that learning communities provide them with increased intellectual stimulation, more involvement in the teaching and learning process, more interaction as members of an academic community and greater access to and interaction with students. Additional Gabelnick, et al. (1990) found that faculty members report that learning communities provides them with the opportunity to become empowered, shape their work, and become colleagues who interact over meaningful issues in pursuit of the common good (p. 80). Learning communities not only empower faculty, but also provide them with an invaluable opportunity to model, mentor and learn (Gabelnick, p. 80). Students' responses to learning communities are apparent in attrition rates, enhanced student academic success, intellectual development, increased interaction with peer groups, the institution, campus faculty, and the curriculum (Shapiro, & Levine, 1999; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1993; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Chesebro, et al., 1999). The results have been significant enough to prompt many colleges to restructure their typical course offerings so that they move from a traditional campus (i.e., independent courses) to a learning communities

campus (i.e., integrated curriculum) where faculty and students are engaged full time in interdisciplinary, active learning around themes (Gabelnick et al. chap. 2).

Learning Communities Defined

Like service learning, learning communities can be somewhat difficult to concretely define. This difficulty lies in the fact that the term itself encompasses several varying models and varying methods of implementing the models. Gabelnick et al., (1990) however, provide a comprehensive definition by defining learning communities as purposefully restructuring curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students (p.5).

Theoretic Foundation of Service Learning and Learning Communities

Both service learning and learning communities are grounded in the work of John Dewey. Dewey's work is at the heart of the cooperative, collaborative and experiential learning movements. Experiential education is a philosophy of learning that links learning to experience. In short, it advocates that the best way to learn something is to do it. This translates into the workplace (e.g., career, volunteer work, internships, etc.) as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education (Kolb, p. 4). Experiential learning is the confluence of the works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. John Dewey, using the philosophical perspective of pragmatism, argued in his book *Experience and Education* that "...there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (1938, p. 20). Kurt Lewin, the founder of American social psychology, used the phenomenological perspective of Gestalt psychology to assert that theory and practice must be integrated. Finally, Jean Piaget, who focused on the cognitive development process, argued that intelligence is shaped by experience. In short, experiential education theorists argue that intelligence is not necessarily an innate internal characteristic of the individual but rather arises as a product of the interaction between the person and his/her environment.

Although service learning's theoretical foundation is grounded in experiential learning, it is only one of many practices also anchored by experiential learning. Community service, internships, and other types of field education such as student teaching also use experiential learning as their theoretical foundation (Anderson, 1998). The difference between these practices and service learning is in their primary focus and beneficiaries. As reported by Anderson (1998), community service involves students providing assistance to individuals, organizations, or the community. The assistance can be direct (helping to run a bingo game at a retirement home) or indirect (sorting clothing at a thrift store). In each case, the primary focus is on providing a service and the main beneficiary is the service recipient. Internships and student teaching focus primarily on the student's learning and the main beneficiary is the service provider. Service learning involves blending the key elements of community service and internships so both the providers and the service recipients benefit (Anderson, 1998).

Like service learning, learning communities are also grounded in Dewey's work. The notion of experiential learning demonstrates Dewey's belief in the process of active learning. This idea is at the heart of collaborative and cooperative learning practices (i.e., structured interaction among students within the classroom and college environment). McKeachie (1988) confirms Dewey's ideas by noting that discussions are superior to lectures in improving thinking and problem solving. Additionally, Dewey believed that learning was an inherently social process (1938), thus, requiring an increased interaction between students and other students and

students and teachers. In fact, cooperative learning practitioners agree that cooperative learning is one of the most effective methods of increasing student involvement. The interdisciplinary nature of learning communities helps to facilitate such active learning by employing cooperative learning techniques. In order to connect the various fields, curriculum is designed to engage faculty and students together to make meaning.

Now that the rationale, definitions, and theoretical foundations for linking service learning and learning communities has been explored, an examination of a sample service learning project will be recounted in the form of a critical reflexive dialogue. The project reconstitution will begin with its inception, moving through its execution, and conclude with a post experience reflection.

Service Learning in the Speech 100 (*Introduction to Human Communication*) and English 100 (*Freshman Composition*) Paired Courses.
Reflections by Kimberly Hubbert, Cerritos College

The Project Inception

Assignment Objectives:

1. To facilitate a list of volunteer organizations in local areas
2. To contact and collaboratively volunteer at two local organizations
3. To use one's group experience to benefit society
4. To encourage critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility.
5. To apply small group communication theories/concepts and link them to the English innocent suffering readings.
6. To use PowerPoint as a vehicle to recount the group's experience

Pre Assignment Planning:

Most students at commuter colleges face several challenges when asked to work in groups and participate in an activity that takes out of class time to complete. Such challenges consist of time constraints, scheduling conflicts, and potential negative attitudes about giving free "time," which is a precious commodity. I knew that I needed to do my homework. In short, I had to be sure to answer the W.I.F.M. question (What Is In It For Me?), allow for plenty of time to complete the assignment, and address possible scheduling difficulties.

Addressing the W.I.F.M. Question:

As a former Key Club advisor, I discussed my experience with volunteering, the experience the high school Key Club participants had, and the experiences of other professionals I know. In addition, I read and clipped several articles from the local paper to illustrate the need, feasibility, and rewards service learning provides. Convincing students that this assignment was not only an excellent small group experience, but also an excellent individual and community experience was not a problem.

Addressing Scheduling:

Although this is never a perfect science, students were grouped according to outside class availability. This enabled them to schedule the volunteering and any other out of class projects with less frustration and difficulty than a random grouping.

Addressing Time:

Understanding that scheduling and time constraints would still be an issue; students were assigned Phase One (see below) by the second week of class with the final project being due the

week before finals. This allowed students to use holidays (e.g., spring break, president's day etc.) to complete any hours that they were simply unable to finish during their "normal" weekly schedules. Additionally, the English course assignment, to which this was linked, was to serve as a starting point and assignment springboard. Thus, discussion of this project was taking place in both classes early in the semester.

The Project Execution

The Assignment:

Phase One:

While completing their readings and essays about innocent suffering, students were assigned three cities around the college and compiled a list of five volunteer organizations (with at least one being from each city). Once they obtained the names and addresses of five organizations, they were required to contact the organization and ask several questions regarding volunteering opportunities. Both the questions to be asked and a sample phone statement to be used when contacting each company/organization were provided. After students obtained the necessary information for at least five volunteer organizations, the groups provided a one-page summary of each volunteer location (5 pages total). The papers contained the following: Name of the organization, address and phone number of the organization, written directions to the location from Cerritos College (including a map), the name, telephone number and e-mail of the contact person. Finally, they included a summary of each organization's volunteer opportunities and required training. (In the future, I would also have them identify and explain this location's link to innocent suffering.)

Phase Two:

Group members decided on an organization(s) at which they would like to volunteer. Then as a group (all members were required to attend together so as to link to their Speech chapter on group communication), they completed ten hours of volunteer work. Each student was given the option to complete five hours at a separate location as an individual or they could remain as a group. Thus, students participated in two different types of volunteering experiences. The hours were divided up according to the groups' liking. The group did, however, need to follow the guidelines listed below.

- All members must complete the 15 hours
- Ten of the fifteen hours must involve the group organizing and working together on a project related to innocent suffering (e.g., developing and implementing an after school tutoring program, volunteering at a food bank, facilitating activities at a retirement center, etc.)
- Each group presented a contract outlining the organization(s) at which they would volunteer and stipulations of the volunteering. Stipulations refer to the exact dates and hours of commitment; proposed punishments for members who don't complete all the hours or contribute their fair share of the work (e.g., grade reduction, singing for the class, extra paper work, etc.). This contract was written and signed by all group members with one copy for each member and the original turned in before the volunteering began.

Phase Three:

After volunteering, each group completed and presented the following to the class:

- Group members kept a journal of their experiences. In short, after each volunteering day, students reflected on what they did, how they felt, and how the group functioned together. One journal entry from each group member for each volunteer day was required. The majority of the entry, about 90%-95%, was to discuss thoughts, feelings, group functioning, and link to innocent suffering while only 5%-10% was to describe the activity.
- A three to four page group paper summarizing the experience.
    1. Begin with a description of the organization(s) that were worked with; and provide a thesis statement.
    2. Discuss the benefits of the experience (both as a group member and a community service participant).
    3. Discuss any downfalls or problems encountered.
        - Provide a summary of what the group learned as a result of this assignment
        - Apply at least one small group communication concept or theory to some aspect of the experience (e.g., systems theory, theories on leadership, conflict, decision making,) and discuss how it related to the innocent suffering readings and essays.
    6. Summarize the experience
- Using Power Point (we used the Cerritos College facilities to help with this), each group summarized the contents of its paper. In short, they began by orally reporting on their innocent suffering readings and essays then discussed and critically assessed their experiences working as a group volunteer. In addition, they discussed how the group used the concepts/theories in the class to successfully complete the project. Students were given 15-20 minutes to do so and were encouraged to use photos and/or video to enhance the presentation. This, of course, is contingent upon the approval of the volunteer site.

The Project's Summary and Reflection:

Post Experience:

The project accomplished what it intended. The student presentations were poignant, enlightening, and entertaining. I was convinced of the project's success after listening to the enthusiasm in each student as he/she recounted the experience. Students made statements such as, "volunteering at the food ministry taught me to appreciate my dinners with my family," and "just walking into the convalescent hospital gave me a creepy feeling. . . I starting having fun once I was participating in the activities such as bingo, dancing, and exercises." Another students expressed her excitement about the experience, "I was very excited about volunteering for this community health fair because its emphasis was to educate African-Americans about health issues (particularly high blood pressure and diabetes) and staying physically fit." Another student, who was initially apathetic, to my surprise and delight, told me that he returned to a convalescent hospital the next day to visit with residents. (These were hours beyond what was required.) These excerpts are just a few of the comments students made in their journal entries, papers, and personal discussions recounting their initial feelings about the project as well as the assignment's impact.

In addition to each group completing their task, the class experienced a very low attrition rate, with only two students, out of about thirty, dropping after the first two weeks. Although there are several factors that contribute to a low class attrition rate, it can be argued that one of the reasons for such low attrition was the cohesion that developed among group members as well as the connection that students felt to their local community as a result of the assignment. This is corroborated by the work of Vincent Tinto (1987).

Reflection:

Clearly the success of such an assignment has been an inspiration. One caveat to learning communities instructors who are considering such an assignment: They must model the service learning. In short, make it a point to model the behavior that is advocated by volunteering (for most instructors this will be more volunteerism than service learning). Hence, it is important to keep current on one's volunteer work and share the stories of such volunteering to the class the following meeting (it is most effective if both instructors do so). This helped to keep the students motivated and piques their interest. Although the assignment is in its nascent stage, service learning has proved to be an effective companion to learning communities, warranting further collaboration between advocates of service learning and learning communities leaders.

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